



# MODERNITY IN A TRADITIONAL SOCIETY: A REFLECTION ON R. K. NARAYAN'S THE GUIDE

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## ABSTRACT

Rasipuram Krishnaswami Iyer Narayanaswami popularly known as R. K. Narayan is one of the most important figures of Indian writing in English and one of the pioneers of Indian fiction in English. Starting with his first novel *Swami and Friends* published in 1935, Narayan has contributed immensely towards Indian fiction writing. Like most Indian writers, Narayan's writing too revolves around the nuances of the Indian family and society. Narayan's novels tell tales of the common Indian individual located in and around Malgudi. Narayan's Malgudi is famous because of its representative nature. Malgudi is fictional but smells, tastes and sounds like any common Indian town of the 1940s-70s. *The Guide* is Narayan's award-winning text. Narayan achieved the 1960 Sahitya Akademi Award for the novel. The novel portrays the stories of individuals caught between a society rooted deep in traditional values, superstitions and believes and the newly developing ideas influenced by the arrival of Western modernity. The conflict between the older and the new values, ideals and believes is very prominent in the novel's narration. In this fusion of the two sets of ideals and lifestyles, the characters point towards the social issues, situations and challenges to survival faced by India as a whole in its progress towards Western modernity. This paper attempts to discuss such issues through a study of the main male character Raju and his life as portrayed in the novel. Raju can be considered as the average Indian in contact with the new modern concepts of life and survival.

**KEYWORDS:** Indian, Tradition, Modernity, Society, Literature.

## INTRODUCTION:

Literature has often been accused of being exclusively based on imagination and hence removed from the real. However, literature has actually been instrumental in the representation of both society and the individual psyche. Therefore, literary texts have been subjected to psychological and social analysis and readings. In the twenty and twenty-first centuries, with various schools of theory and practice, like modernism, feminism, post-modernism and post colonialism, literature has actively taken a polemical role in representing society and its relative issues. This issue of literature, representation and literature's relation to the real has been brought up because this paper will attempt at discussing a literary text (*The Guide*) and its portrayal of a phase of the overall Indian society. Society has been integral in the fiction by Indian writers. One major reason that can be attached to this statement is that, an individual situated in a society that is deeply rooted in tradition, cannot be isolated from and cannot exclusively subjectify the individual self dissociated from society and its traditions. Unlike the Western modern and postmodern novels that focus on the exploration of the individual self, novels by Indian writers writing about India explores the individual self through the individual's relation to and position in society. R. K. Narayan is one among the three important figures of Indian writing in English, the other two being Raja Rao and Mulk Raj Anand. His novels are known to provide the readers with a taste of everyday India through the language, the setting, the characters and indeed the whole narrative style. His novels are also famous for their setting: Malgudi. For most of his fiction, the setting is in and around Malgudi, a small developing town around the time of India's independence and the following post-independence years. Malgudi appears like a typical south-Indian town, although it is a fictional place. Malgudi becomes important because it becomes representative of every developing town in India, and the areas around Malgudi representative of rural India as a whole. Despite the diversity, India has always hold on to the similarities and these similarities help in looking into the overall changes and social situations that India has gone through down the ages. Prof. K. V. Dominic notes on Malgudi and its surrounding areas in *The Guide*: This semi-urban and largely rural setting is typical of the places in which most Indians live. Thus the locale is almost the microcosm of India. Through the social portrait of a single region, Narayan succeeds in presenting the larger picture of Indian society, both in its general features as well as in its specifically post-independence lineaments.

Emphasising upon the term "semi-urban", *The Guide* can be studied as the representation of the Indian society in transition, progressing towards Western influenced modernity and moving away from the traditional ways of the ancestors. This change however, has not been smooth. The inclusion of Western modernity and its ideas in India brought about mostly by British colonisation, happened with levels of catastrophes. Although the coming of western modernity has obvious benefits, yet these benefits are not free of the oddities and consequences. It is often noticed, that, for change to happen, loss is certain. In order to usher in the new, the old has to make space. The same can be said of the Indian societies, in their movement towards western modernity. In a country like India, where society is deeply rooted in traditional ideas and livelihood that has evolved down the centuries, the further inclusion of western norms and modernity was not an easy affair. This process of the fusion of western modernity into the Indian traditional

space, therefore, has still not attained a smooth closure. The oddities and polarities between ideas are characteristic of this fusion and hence this fusion is still in the process. The society portrayed and represented in *The Guide* reflects such oddities and situations of a society in transition, where western modernity can in fact be seen as a challenge to survival, despite the apparent advantages offered by its arrival.

## I. The Guide:

The novel is an autobiographical narration of the main male protagonist Raju, intersected by the narration of the third person narrator. The novel narrates the story of Raju's life in episodic form, from childhood till the point where his life crosses the boundary of the personal and enters into a realm where he finally chooses to have no more control over his personal life. From a childhood rooted in rural Indian tradition and lifestyle, Raju's life gradually undergoes changes, twists and turns. These changes and turns of Raju's life can be seen as consequences and resultants of the influence of western modernity. The movement away from the earlier tradition and believes starts in Raju's life basically with the coming of the railways. The two major outcomes that mark the effects of western modernity in Raju's life are his turning into a professional tourist guide by abandoning his father's profession of running their shop at the railway station and then the attraction towards Rosie that leads Raju to act like a 'modern' man bringing about a series of changes in his life that eventually ends in prison. Both the outcomes were initiated by the arrival of the railways which itself is a symbol of western modernity. Although there is no explicit suggestion, yet it can be said that the novel while charting the changes of Raju's life ends up suggesting that the process of changes initiated by western modernity is eventually retrogressive rather than progressive. Hence, the ending of the novel is marked by a return to the very traditions from which Raju has moved away from; the resultant of which is self realisation and an eventual attainment of spirituality and selflessness – the Indian believes winning over the western.

## II. Oddities of a changing society:

R. K. Narayan's *The Guide* is set in a period that can be seen as a transition between the pre-colonial rural India and the India that is on its way towards western modernity after British imperialism. The intrusion of new ideas brought about by the various aspects of western modernity caused changes. These encountered existing Indian values and ways of living and gave rise to conflicts and confusion. Modernity with its scientific, industrial and technological developments, no doubt brought about immense positive changes and developments to India. But the changes that these new developments brought about, influenced and affected the traditional, social and cultural ideologies of the Indian society which in turn had an impact on the way of living and the various circumstances of life. The advent of western modernity by clashing with the pre-existing Indian mindset, made tradition and modernity collide, which in turn gave rise to complexities in the lives of people. Such complexities posed as challenges to life. Imbibing modernity with its advantages and disadvantages involved conflicts and struggles in varying degrees, both within the individual and without, that is, in the individual's relation with society and former tradition and lifestyle.

### III. Modernity as a challenge to survival:

The discussion on the influences of western modernity upon the common Indian population can be validated through a discussion of the character of Raju. Raju becomes representative of the average Indian located in a society in transition, sandwiched between the former Indian values and the newer western ideas of modernity.

To be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world – and, at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are. (Berman, 1988)

What Berman says about being modern is very much applicable to the case of Raju. The railways and Rosie play very significant roles in the life of Raju, gradually bringing in “adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation” and eventually destruction (Berman, 1988). The railway line in itself is a potent symbol of modernity and Rosie too carries aspects of modern thought and characteristics of the new way of life influenced by modernity. Arrival of both bring about changes and a series of turning points in Raju's life. Raju by allowing himself to be affected by their influence undergoes transformations that lead him to his fall. Although Raju experiences success and achievement in the process, he however has to face complications, some of which are beyond his proper understanding. The changed situations in his life continuously cause him trouble of one sort or the other, eventually making him end up in jail. Raju has to struggle against these odds in order to keep his existence intact. The coming of the railway line brings about considerable rise in the income of Raju's father. But it is also the railway that serves as a primary cause for Raju's change in thinking and outlook towards life, which eventually makes him leave his father's profession and then his father's house, in order to chase his ambitious desires. The railway line opened up the homogeneous and cocooned Malgudi to the outer world. This opening up saw the inflow of various people. Increase in transaction occurred. Tourism as a profession began to grow up. Raju discovers his interest in showing people the various spots of interest around and enjoys the benefits that came along. The presence of the printing press and publishing industry provide Raju the easy access to bits and scraps of papers from books and newspapers that he reads and uses to his own advantage of procuring information on miscellaneous subjects. Rosie too comes along in his life because of the railways. All these contribute to make Raju leave his father's profession. By leaving the earlier way of life as lived by his parents, Raju loses the simple but cosy existence and steps into a rather dynamic and challenging life that provides him with hopes of newness, adventure and profit. However, Raju finally realises the risk that such a life involves.

Rosie, on the other hand, carries aspects of modern influence in her desire and attempt to establish her career as a dancer and fulfil her individual passion, against all odds. She serves as a foil to Raju's mother who follows traditional values. Unlike Raju's mother, who has never been to the market except once, being accompanied by his father, Rosie roams about with a man who is not her husband and stays with that man both before and after her marriage breaks. Raju too, being affected by a modern way of life, has a liberal attitude toward Rosie. In allowing himself to be lured by her attraction, Raju makes himself beneficial to Rosie in her struggle of securing her career and asserting her identity as a dancer and as an individual. It is however, problematic, that despite being an educated woman, her identity suffers. Perhaps, this too indicates the in-between state of a person caught up in the fusion of the traditional and the modern. Several aspects and products of modern life contribute towards Raju's entanglement with Rosie. After the railway, the automobiles, hotels and the rising tourism industry can be named. These provide them with a private space and contribute to the development of their relation – the relation that makes Raju undergo the subsequent rise and fall. Raju narrates: My troubles would not have started... but for Rosie (Narayan, 2013). Raju defies traditional norms and allows Rosie to stay at his father's house, and despite his mother's complains and dissatisfactions, arranges for Rosie's dance practices. However, Raju is not selfless in providing his help. Driven by the materialistic instincts of modern life, he begins to draw benefit from Rosie's dance performances. Characteristic of a modern life, Raju's ambition and desire for fulfilment of individual wants keep on increasing. He loses himself in the desire for more. Desire for money, status and power begin to control him and he turns into a busy, wealthy man who is lost in corruption and vanity. Raju develops an uncontrollable desire for progress and material comfort and in this he begins to cross moral and even legal boundaries. He exploits Rosie to gain the maximum amount of wealth and fame possible. As Berman states of the modern man, Raju too gains the “capacity to exploit crisis and chaos as a spring board for still more development, to feed itself on its own self-destruction” (Berman, 1988).

Raju turns Rosie's art into a medium of gaining currency. He becomes a different Raju from the one at the beginning who appears to value Rosie's dancing skill as an art. Tagore describes “greed of gain” as:

Its one object is to produce and consume. It has pity neither for beautiful nature nor for living human beings. It is ruthlessly ready without a moment's hesitation to crush beauty and life out of them, moulding them into money. (Tagore, 1950)

Raju's 'greed of gain' too reaches an extreme position. He turns Rosie's work of

art into a mechanical workout: We were going through a set of mechanical actions day in and day out - ... - pocketing the most important thing, the cheque (Narayan, 2013). The extremity of his greed eventually becomes the cause of his fall. He is being unable even to let go off Rosie's share of her ornaments from her husband, and ends up forging her signature. He gets caught and ends up serving in jail, after which ends up pretending to be a swami. Raju's act of abandoning his mother, relatives, traditional values and adoption of modern, materialistic ideas and outlook towards life, can be said to have misguided him into a life of deceit and corruption. His breaking away from older values and bonds leads him to a situation where he fails to distinguish between what should and what should not be done. He fails to refrain himself from what is legally and morally wrong. All these give rise to complexities of situation that pose as a threat to his very existence. He loses all that he gains through his ambitious ideals.

When Raju comes out of jail, he takes shelter under traditional beliefs and rituals by pretending to be a swami. But he is again interrupted by the irreversible changes brought about by modern influences. The press and journalists unnecessarily overdo the publicity about the swami that the villagers have spread out of belief. These people who are the products of modernity look at the swami not out of faith but out of curiosity and with an aim at attaining commercial gains from such happenings and publicity. It is due to the modern technologies of communication and broadcasting that even the American man has been attracted to the spot. Raju finally has to succumb to the twelve days fasting because he is unaccustomed to such a practice. With the gradual advent of modernity, Indians have gradually become unaccustomed to and out of practice of the traditional rituals. A twelve day fast for a real swami would not have been a very big affair. Raju, on the other hand, being only a common human, naturally fails to survive the dehydration and malnutrition caused by the fasting. A possibility appears that, had not Raju detached himself from his earlier way of livelihood, his family and traditional values, in search of material success, he might not have suffered all these troubles.

### CONCLUSION:

The modern influences brought about mainly by British colonialism have caused irreversible changes to the Indian traditional, social and cultural values and modes of life. The impact of modernisation cannot be done away with. Along with the advantages of material and scientific developments, western modernity in the Indian context, by bringing about changes through replacement of the earlier values and ways of life, had caused social problems and complexities in the initial years that has continued even till date. Modernity seems to have complicated life itself for the common Indian by inducing competition and the increasing desire for material success in the consciousness of the Indian mass. The characteristic material seduction that can be attached to modernity can be considered to be an effective cause behind such complexities. Western concepts of modernity have provided ample grounds for material seduction that in turn encourage the individual to cross limits drawn by traditional values. Such seduction has the potential to lead individuals to their eventual downfall as in the case of Raju and also in the long run potential to cause complexities in society through social evils instigated by the desire for more. The desire for more material success often leads the society towards corruption and such evils. Such statements might appear limiting and conclusive. Such statements need not necessarily be considered as facts, but rather as philosophical and critical reflections on society. Nevertheless, the case of modernity in the Indian scenario as portrayed in *The Guide*, compels us to reflect upon India's present social situations from a deeper insight. Narayan's portrayal rises questions regarding the effectiveness of western modernity in a traditional society like India and how far has western modernity been able to bring out the positive phase in social values, ethics and consciousness of the mass Indian population.

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